FOR THE LOVE OF IT

May 25, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"Greater love has no man than this, that a man
lay down his life for his friends." --John 15:13 (RSV)

Scripture
John 15:11-17

Dennis Leonard is a professional baseball player, a pitcher for the Kansas City Royals. He is a good one and his remarkable come-back this year from a serious knee injury is inspiring enough to have landed him in the sports section of Time magazine recently. From 1975 through 1982, Dennis Leonard won more games than any other pitcher but one. If someone did that to me I'd spend the rest of the morning trying to figure out who won the most games. And so - in the interest of keeping ardent baseball fans and trivia addicts with us let me hasten to say that Steve Carlton won the most games, 75-82. Dennis Leonard's knee collapsed in 1983 and he could have simply retired on his handsome and guaranteed income. But he didn't. He subjected himself to four knee operations. He worked very hard with therapists and went to the Royals training room every day for two years. And then last year he did something 34 year old professionals don't usually do - he started his career all over again - with a minor league team, Class A, and then the Double A Memphis Chicks. This year he's back and doing well. During his long and arduous recuperation he said that one of the helpful things he did was spend time with youngsters, coaching. He said "watching the kids play these last few years, I remembered how we all started out playing for the love of game."

For the love of it. What a joy it is to see someone do what he or she loves to do. In this day of multi-million dollar contracts what a refreshing joy to know someone is throwing baseballs, or singing songs, or writing contracts, or delivering babies, or cooking meals, or driving a cab...for the love of it. What a joy when Michael Jordan against best advice - played and when asked why said "I'm a basketball player." Not totally naively, I trust, many people were entranced with a football team last fall that seemed to love to play football.

For the love of it.... Play the game for the love of it. Live life for the love of it. Those are strong words, - some would say foolish, naive, altrustic ideas. But I submit that there is something of the meaning and potential of our humanity in them, and more than a little of the spirit of a man who once said - "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for a friend." [John 15:13 Inclusive Language Lectionary]

Jesus said it, in the section of the Gospel according to John, the New Testament scholars call "the Farewell Discourses." The scene is the table of the Last Supper, the night of his arrest. The atmosphere is heavy, overloaded in fact with tension and significance. It is time for saying some final things. When the children go out for the night, or when you drop them off at college, parents try to say final things: "Don't stay out too late, be careful, keep your room cleaned, eat right." Jesus had said already: "I am the vine: you are the branches." He had told them that he loved them even as God loved them. Now he told them that they were to love one another. Love would bind them together for the ordeal ahead. The inquisitive among them,... Thomas for instance, might have asked "What love, Jesus? How are you using the word love?" We would organize a Task Force to research it, and report back in a year. Jesus anticipated the question in one of the most sublime sentiments ever put into words. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Later, Paul would write about his crucifixion in cosmic terms, as a dying on behalf of all people. But here, on the evening before it happened, Jesus is putting it in far simpler terms. He was dying because he loved his friends.

Catholic scholar Raymond Brown observes that the deeper one goes into this marvelous text, the more the words love and life become almost interchangeable. His own love is here laid down as a model. Brown says: "One of the great distinguishing characteristics of Christianity is here in the example of giving life away in order to find it." [The Gospel of John, Vol. 2, p. 682]

If you want to live you have to love enough to forget about your own life, love enough to give your own life away. It is the Christian secret. The world doesn't know it. It is not simply an invitation to grim martyrdom, the kind of eschatological cheer leading that motivates fanatic terrorists to blow themselves up in order to win their reward in the hereafter. The key here is love - Greater love has no one than this. If you wish to live fully you must love enough to give your life. For the love of it is precisely the point.

And it is directly and dramatically contrary to what we think are instincts of survival and common sense and it is certainly contrary to the prevailing winds of a culture characterized by the phrase The New Narcissism. Narcissus, you will recall, is that beautiful young man in Roman mythology who fell madly in love with his own reflection in a pool of clear water. He was so much in love with himself that he could not leave the pool, ultimately died there and was changed into a flower.

We are, in fact, obsessed with ourselves. Self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-actualization, winning, getting ahead, using power, succeeding - topically dominate a whole new genre of American literature. Joseph Sittler laments somewhere that he never got to discover himself - in fact, he didn't know - until it was too late - that he had a self that needed to be discovered. How to be your own best friend, lose weight, get in shape, have better orgasms and an overpowering tennis serve...we are tottering on the edge of that mythological pool, I think sometimes, about to fall in.

One of the most talked about books of the past year or so is Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life, by five California sociologists, the best known of whom is Robert Bellah. They got their title from deTocqueville's classic 1830's study, Democracy in America. deTocqueville was entranced with American "Habits of the Heart." But there was one that could erode the whole experiment and undermine the conditions of freedom. He called it "Individualism"...the inclination to act solely in my own self interest, as opposed to the common interest, or the common good. The book concludes that we are in the middle of an epidemic of individualism and it is eating away at the vital care of our society like a malignancy. When, for instance, in the past two decades has a politician dared base a political appeal on anything but flat out self interest? Who, in the politicaal establishment, dares suggest that the survival of the race - human life - is more important than any national agenda? Who could get elected on a platform that suggested that being number one isn't what it's cracked up to be? Who dares suggest that the common good - the future viability of the whole system is more important than an economic phenomena which is making us enormously wealthy while running up an enormous debt for our children and grandchildren to pay.

The New York Times, in a review of the book, tried to be hopeful: "Our problems today are not just political. They are moral and have to do with the meaning of life... We are beginning to understand that our common life requires more than an exclusive concern for material accumulation. Perhaps life is not a race whose only goal is being foremost." [N.Y.T. Book Review, 4/14/85]

There are signs that we are in the process of re-thinking our narcissism. Time magazine last week reported that Baby Boomers - people around 40 - "have relentlessly pursued happiness as an end in itself... Few found it... Today, many have renounced the lonely persuit of self. Increasingly, they are groping to find a sense of worth in selflessness." [Time, 5/19/86, p. 37] I want to make the modest observation that young urban professionals, known sometimes critically, as YUPPIES, have been treated unfairly in this context. The popular assumption is that Young Urban Professionals are "taste makers" the elite corps of the new consumerism... "if it's new, expensive and faddish and advertised in the right slick magazine - buy it." I'm concluding that this image, this stereotype is in part, perhaps a major part, a product of the market place which needs an ever increasing spiral of consumption in order to continue to grow, and whose self interest is very much in convincing people that the meaning of life is related to how much "stuff" they have. On the other hand, I keep encountering Young Urban Professionals, the taste makers, tutoring children on Monday and Thursday nights, or riding the van to Cook County Jail in the P.A.C.E. program, or sitting around over coffee asking hard questions about the meaning of it all. That is to say, "finding a sense of worth in selflessness."

For the love of it... Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life..." It is the Gospel and it has always been celebrated and supported by authorities who regard the human condition thoughtfully.

Viktor Frankl is an Austrian psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and when he talks about our humanity it is worth listening. He wrote: "The more one forgets oneself - giving oneself to a cause or another person - the more human he/she is... Primarily and normally man does not seek pleasure. Happiness is the side-effect of living out the self transcendence of existence. Once one has served a cause or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself." [The Unconscious God, p. 77ff]

Frankl invokes an older wisdom than the narcissism in the fashionable profane Perry Ellis perfume ads: Karl Jaspers, for one, who wrote: "What one is, he has become, through that cause that he has made his own" [p. 78]. How tragic, how small, how limited, if that cause we have made our own is our own amusement.

Christianity submits that the "summum bonum," the greatest good to which the philosophers have always directed their best attention, is somehow wrapped up in giving life away. "If you want to find your life you have to lose it," Jesus said. "A person must plunge into life," his disciple, Dietrick Bonhoeffer said a few months before he gave his away. Christianity has the further audacity to suggest that the greatest joy is related to forgetting about one's self, one's happiness, success, or gratification. In fact, what Christianity really maintains is that we become our truest selves when we forget about our selves: that we are never more fully who we are, than in the act of living for the love of it... It's a little like what happens in front of a camera for most of us. Spontaneous, unposed pictures are best, of course. Candid shots are funny, honest, not always beautiful, but real - human. Did you ever notice how unnatural and awkward every gesture becomes for most of us when someone turns on a movie camera? It's because you are concentrating intensly on your self, and suddenly your posture, your gait, the position of your hands feels awkward, unreal. We are who we are, most honestly and thoroughly when we are not focussed on self. We live and we love best - as we forget about ourselves. We live most creatively and joyfully - for the love of it.

Donald Macleod, Princeton Seminary, used to tell a story from one of his classes during the 50's. It was his custom to ask one of his students to open each class with prayer. He had invited a young man who had to escape from his homeland to save his life and whose chances of ever returning to his family were minimal. The young man prayed: "O God, ever give us something to die for, for if we have nothing to die for, we have nothing for which to live."

The Gospel of Christ maintains that if we have nothing we love passionately, nothing we weep and laugh and hope for and for which we would die, we have nothing for which to live but self - and - if Jesus Christ is to be trusted - that's not really living. What a revolutionary word that is. How to get the most out of your life? Find something to give your life to. How to get the most out of your relationships? Forget about what you're not getting, and start giving.

There is a word for the church here. Bruce Buursma wrote a strong editorial last week about the continuing decline of mainline churches in

our country and the feverish attempts of the denominations - including our own - to stem the tide. It is a complicated problem to be sure. But it seems to me that those of us who chose to be in the church together need to acknowledge that our corporate life is under the same mandate of Christ as individual life. My suggestion is that church vitality results not from a frantic commitment to strengthening ourselves - but from a passionate love for Christ and the world that is willing to sacrifice and die if need be. I continue to believe that one of the reasons people don't come to church is that it has been a long time since the church which calls itself the body of Christ was seen to care enough about anything to die for it, or sacrifice for it, or give it priority over institutional survival and protection. There is nothing very interesting or compelling after all about an institution that seems to be concerned chiefly about itself.

Memorial Day is an annual reminder not of the glory of war but that in the 210 year story of this nation a lot of people have died for the rest of us. It is always for me a reminder of two McCormicks and three Buchanans - who I barely knew, who were in Europe and the South Pacific in World War II and the three who died. It is a reminder to be grateful that somehow they - and all the others - came to terms with the possibility that they might not come home, that there was something worth dying for.

This year particularly, Memorial Day is a poignant reminder of the Challenger disaster and the seven astronauts who died. It is still very much in the news and it will be until we have determined why it happened. In the middle of that necessary inquiry I hope we do not lose sight of the fact that seven young Americans gave their lives for something they loved.

Of all the things written about it in the traumatic aftermath, my favorite was by Joyce Maynard, a syndicated columnist and also a wife and mother:

"Shall I tell my children tonight the story of Icarus flying too close to the sun?" she asked. "Is Christa McAuliffe's final lesson that mothers are better off staying at home?... What I chose to remind myself...is that the only home worth having is the kind that makes you strong enough to venture forth. That nothing is worth much that comes without risk. Giving someone your heart. Having a child... The more you risk, the more you have to gain. The more you have, the more you have to lose.

"And still, it's for all of us to press on, not shrink back. Who can forget those last two words spoken by Mission Control the moment before the sky exploded? Full throttle." [Chicago Tribune, 1/28/86.]

Jesus Christ invites us to a loyalty deeper than our self interest; a commitment that transcends all others. He asks of you and me, a willingness to die, which is no less than a willingness to live fully. And he invites us - for the love of it.

The most incredible thing of all is that what Jesus said and subsequently did, walking out of that upper room, into the jaws of death, is Gospel, "Good News" about a God - who operates - "for the love of it." A God who, for the love of the world, became one of us and lived and died

for us and call us to the fullness of our own lives by that same radical commitment.

"These things I have spoken to you that your joy may be full," he said. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for a friend."

That is the Gospel and the summons.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lord God, we thank you for the sacrifice and dedication of all who have gone before us. We give thanks for the lives of all who have died in the service of this country: for the lives of all those whose love for the church have made her strong. O God, forgive us when we worry too much about ourselves, and for Christ's sake, stir up love within us. Amen.